

# UFYB 94: Thought Avoidance



## Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

**Kara Loewentheil**

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## UFYB 94: Thought Avoidance

Welcome to *Unf\*ck Your Brain*, the only podcast that teaches you how to use psychology, feminism, and coaching, to rewire your brain and get what you want in life. And now here's your host, Harvard law school grad, feminist rockstar, and master coach, Kara Loewentheil.

Hello my chickens. I am fired up today. I want to share this amazing idea with you. So I cannot take credit for this - well, I take credit for creating the framework. No, it's a genius idea that one of my Clutch members had that you can all use too.

I have to say, there are so many brilliant ideas coming up in that group, like having so many women thinking about the work and applying it and talking to each other is just exponentially creating more learning and growth, but even just amazing ideas that didn't even occur to me to share in a podcast. I mean, that didn't occur to me at all.

So this one's really fun and I think it will be really useful for a lot of you so I want to share it, and I of course got permission. So you may remember I did an episode recently on multitasking and productivity, and I teach in that episode about how you have to schedule blocks of time for what you're going to do, turn off your notifications, social media, Slack, email, calendar alerts, all that stuff.

And then you have to work on allowing the urges to go look at those things because even if they're turned off, your brain is like, what's on Facebook? What's on Instagram? What's on Slack? Maybe we have an email. So you have to allow the urges to do that.

So one of my Clutch students, whose name is Lauren Pittinger - hopefully I pronounced that right - had this idea she posted in the Facebook group. So good. And there are so many good ideas in there y'all, so if you are listening to this and you're a Clutch member who shared an idea and I'm not talking about on the podcast, there are many of you, that doesn't mean

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your ideas aren't amazing. There are so many good ideas in there, but I just think this one caught my eye and it's so easy to use for anyone who's listening to the podcast.

So this was Lauren's idea. What she did was she got a cheap frame and she printed up a quote she likes or just a word. I forget what she used. Somebody else I think did a quote they liked. But anyway, you just put - you can just a frame but you could also just use a sheet of paper. It doesn't matter. You just get something that you can put stickers on and put it on your desk.

And then when she's working, every time she has an urge to distract herself, either because it's just a habituated urge or because she wants to procrastinate because her brain is telling her she's not good enough, the work is stupid, somebody will think a bad thing about her, whatever it is, every time she wants to procrastinate or do something else, and she allows it and stays on task, she gives herself a little sticker.

So she puts a little sticker on the frame or the photo or the quote or the piece of paper, however you want to do it. And it's so brilliant because giving yourself a sticker does take you away from your work for 20 seconds or whatever, but it's a pretty effective hack to redirect your brain's desire for dopamine and give yourself a little reward every time you modify your behavior.

And as the stickers build up, you are accumulating experience allowing urges and you have visual evidence that you are good at this and you can do it. So I think that that's simple and brilliant and you could all do it today and it would be super useful. It's so smart. I mean, obviously I always learn from coaching and talking to my students, it's one of the reasons I love this job, but having The Clutch has really scaled that up in so many ways and it's just so fun to see all of your different amazing brains take in the work

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and synthesize it and come up with ways of doing it and new ideas that didn't even occur to me. So fun.

So give that a try and see what you think. I have another great suggestion for you but you have to listen to the end of the podcast to hear it. So before we get there, that's the dessert after dinner. Let's talk about thought avoidance. It's all the dessert. Everything I'm giving you is delightful. Let's talk about thought avoidance.

So I was on vacation recently. I spent a few days by myself in a house in the woods basically. There was a town, I went into town, but as you've probably picked up on, I'm usually a city girl. I do not really like to camp. I do not like being bitten by bugs. I have made peace with these preferences. They're just thoughts. I could change them if I wanted to but I am not invested in changing them.

But it has been a really intense year. It's really been like, a pretty intense three years since I launched this little juggernaut of a coaching business and I was really craving some peace and quiet. So I found this cabin, had a soaking tub, I had a whole bathtub thing and a screened in porch, which is like, now I understand what heaven is. It's a screened in porch so you can kind of be outside and the bugs can't bite you.

And while I was hanging out on my own for a few days, you can imagine I had a lot of time to observe my own brain. So one of the things that I just love about this kind of example or experience is it's so striking to me that before I discovered thought work and before I managed my mind, I didn't even want to take a car drive by myself.

I had to have podcasts queued up or specific kinds of music. I was so afraid to be alone with my own mind. I did not want to be alone with my own thoughts because they were so painful. And now all I want to do is for

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everyone to go and leave me alone for a few days so that I can just be with myself and my own brain.

That's what it is when you're truly your own best friend and there's no thought or feeling you're not willing to have. It's almost like you start to crave the space for that. The same way if you have a good friend that you don't get to see that often or your partner, if you don't connect to them for a while, you start to feel kind of disconnected and you want to spend some time with them and connect.

Of course, it's caused by your thoughts but you get caught up in the daily bustle of life, what it really means is you haven't stopped to think about them and appreciate them and connect to them in your mind, and so often we think we need the physical time with them to do that. We think we do. We don't, but that's how we live our lives usually.

And the same thing kind of happens now for me with my relationship with myself. If I have not had enough quiet time with myself to check in with myself and hear what's going on with me and pay attention to my thoughts and just be with myself, I start to feel that same disconnection and that same lack that I would if it was just somebody external that I loved.

So I just find that really beautiful. Not just the willingness to be alone with ourselves, which a lot of us don't have, but actually the desire to. The desire to be alone with myself without distractions. So anyway, I was obviously observing my own brain. I was very consciously not working. That's what vacation is.

But of course, for me because I have done this work so consistently, and not just because I'm a professional coach, I see my students in The Clutch who really commit to the work too experience this also. It's kind of impossible not to notice my thoughts and observe my brain now because it's just kind of automatic.

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So it's very difficult for me to be in a default state of just believing whatever I think and feeling all over the place like I used to because your brain learns a habit like anything else and my brain has learned the habit to pay attention to itself. I was definitely not born this way. But because I practiced over and over.

So I was hanging out, I was reading, I was napping, I was noticing my brain, and one of the things that I noticed was something that sort of seen out of the corner of my eye before but hadn't really focused on, and that is what I am teaching you about today. That's a phenomenon that I call thought avoidance.

Because as I started to notice this in my own brain, I started to think about it, I realized it's actually a huge issue in thought work. One of the things that I work on with my students all the time is how to actually practice new thoughts. And I talk about this on the podcast all the time too. It's one thing to understand conceptually that we can change our thoughts. That is kind of mind-blowing. Sometimes it's hard to understand, but it makes sense theoretically at an abstract level.

It's when we actually work on changing the thoughts that the rubber meets the road, we discover how challenging that can be. And one of the things that we do that makes it 10 times worse for ourselves is we engage in thought avoidance. And most of the time we don't even know that's what we're doing, which is what makes it even harder to spot.

So today I'm going to explain to you what thought avoidance is and how you can tell when you're doing it. Plus obviously, what to do to change it. So when we are wanting to change a thought, we have a current thought that we want to change. Like we have the current thought. We want to change it.

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And the thought is usually negative, especially when we're starting out with thought work. That doesn't have to be the case. As we get more advanced, we start to see that we have thoughts that might feel good but that we actually want to change because they're holding us back in some way. It's like a thought plateau, but that's advanced level.

So for the purposes of this episode, you can just assume it's a negative thought that you want to change. And thought avoidance is really only a problem when we have a negative thought we don't want to have. If we have a thought that we think feels good, and it may feel good but it's holding us back in some way, we're not usually avoiding that thought. In fact, we think it a lot because it feels good.

So thought avoidance is really only a problem when we have a thought we think is negative and we don't want to have. So we decide we want to change the thought, we come up with our new thought to practice, like we're all committed. The old thought comes up. Now, we're prepared for this. We know what's going to happen. Of course old thoughts come up. That neural circuit still exists. But what happens is we are so desperate to change our thought that we try to run away from the old thought before it's even really gotten out.

And this can happen I think either with a thought that we are very familiar with and trying to change or a new thought that our brain comes up with that is negative that we're scared of. I'm going to give you an example of that in a minute.

So you think of it like when someone's talking to you and you interrupt them before they can finish the sentence, or even the first word. That's what thought avoidance is like. You start to think a thought you don't like and before you can even finish it, you try to drown it out by thinking another thought, or you yank the steering wheel, your brain away and try to drive it in a different direction.

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And I find often this has a kind of frantic feeling to it, like there's an urgency to it. You feel kind of agitated. You're really trying to change that thought immediately before it can even finish in your brain, which happens in a split second.

So here's an example of how this happened to me recently. I have talked on the podcast before about having kind of chronic pain, being hypermobile and having loose ligaments, and so parts of my body click and clack out of place, create pain. And in addition to that, I've had a specifically weird kind of leg strain and pain when walking and running for literal years. It's been a decade on and off and it would come and go, but I could never get rid of it for good and I went to the doctors, I got every kind of bodywork you can imagine. I really had tried everything I thought.

And then recently, my massage therapist released my psoas, which is one of the big muscles that connects the upper and lower parts of your body, and it solved the problem. Basically took care of the problem. Not permanently. I have to keep getting it done, but it was like we finally found the actual source of the problem and could correct it.

So I was thrilled for five minutes, and then because I have a human brain like you, this is what my brain started thinking about. I can't believe it took 10 years to diagnose this, I can't believe you wasted a decade. You could have been moving without pain this whole time. You could have run marathons. You would be a size two, your whole life would be different. You'd be blissfully happy. You'd be married to a billionaire.

Like, my brain was just like, off to the races with how everything would be different in my life if I had known about this psoas thing earlier. So crazy, brains. But what I noticed was that that started happening in my brain and then I was so freaked out by those thoughts that I didn't even want to let them in the door. I was afraid to have those thoughts.

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I didn't want to have those thoughts because I was afraid of how it would feel if I had them. I was afraid that if I actually allowed those thoughts, that I would believe them and feel bad. So I was trying to cut myself off and change that thought immediately. I actually have seen a meme going around that sounds empowering, but I actually think is - not problematic, like not in the political sense. I just mean it's not helpful.

It says something like I literally cut myself off in the middle of negative thinking like girl, we don't have time for that. So it's a little complicated because when you have a thought pattern you're super familiar with and you already truly know it's just a thought and you're working on changing it and you're not agitated about it, then yeah, sometimes when your brain - like when my brain starts going - like, whenever I go for a run my brain is like, don't do it, it's hard, it will hurt, let's stay at home, and I'm like, no. Just stop because I don't have a lot of emotion there.

So sometimes that does work, but when there's a lot of emotion associated with a thought, like when you're afraid to think it or you're agitated when it comes up, you want to get away from it, cutting yourself off is not a good idea. It's like you're at an awkward party and you're trying to avoid someone so you don't make eye contact, you don't look at that part of the room. You try to speed walk past them.

That's what I was doing. So I just jumped to trying to think everything that I've experienced had to happen to allow this to unfold. I went to trying to go too fast to a positive thought because I was afraid to think those thoughts about how I had wasted a decade and whatever. But it didn't feel good. That thought did not bring me peace. I felt kind of agitated and a little bit freaked out, and it's because I was avoiding the original thought.

I was resisting it. I was trying to not even acknowledge it was there because I didn't want it to be there. I didn't want to think about it because I was afraid it was "true" or that I believed it and then I would feel terrible. So

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what was happening is I was believing that thought had some power and was dangerous to me. But of course, it didn't. It was just a thought and it's just a sentence in my mind. Thoughts are only powerful when you believe them and act on them and don't examine them.

Just having one float through your mind, even just believing one, it's not dangerous. It's not a problem. It's just a thought. It's only a problem when you decide it's a problem and you go into thought avoidance mode and then you make it a problem by ignoring it and resisting it and trying to run away from it and trying to jump to thinking something you don't believe.

So I want you to think about, if you're listening to this, whether there's a thought in your life that you're avoiding. There may be one, there may be 10. Is there a thought in your life that you don't want to look at directly and you're trying to skip over? What is that thought? If you're in The Clutch, I want you to go share your answer in the Facebook group and discuss it. What are the thoughts that you are trying to avoid?

Because when you do that, you're giving your thought this unconscious power, and that actually makes it impossible to change it. We can only truly change our thoughts when we actually understand and internalize that they are thoughts. They're not circumstances, they're not feelings. They're not actions. They're not reality. They're not objective truth. They're not just reports from the outside world.

They're just thoughts. They're just sentences in our mind. They're not dangerous. But when we tell ourselves it's a problem to think a certain thought, we shouldn't think it or it's bad to think it or it's dangerous to think it, we don't want to think it, we don't want to feel the way we'd feel if we thought it, that's when we go into thought avoidance.

And that means we never look it squarely in the eye and so we can never change it. This is why thought avoidance is a problem. Not only does it feel

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terrible but actually, it makes it impossible to change the thought. So I want you to think about something in your house that was broken. Let's say your fridge stops working. You don't know why.

How well would you be able to fix it if you refused to ever look directly at the fridge and you didn't open up the fridge? You just saw it wasn't working and you tried to rush by it and put your hand out so it couldn't talk to you. Or just kind of waved at it from across the room and then averted your eyes. That wouldn't fix the fridge. You have no idea what's going on in there, you don't know why it's broken, you don't know what you can do to solve it.

It's not how you fix a fridge and that's not how you change a thought. If you don't ever stop long enough to acknowledge and observe a thought and look it directly in the face and make eye contact with it, you'll never be able to change it because the ability to change a thought is only derived from accepting that it is a thought. That it's just a thought, it's totally optional, it's merely a sentence in your mind.

When you are in thought avoidance mode, you won't sit still and be present with the thought. You won't make eye contact. You won't look at it directly. And that gives it so much power over you. You make it something dangerous you have to avoid, which is the opposite of the truth, which is that it's totally harmless.

We cannot change things we don't accept. If you do not accept and observe a thought and allow it, there's no way for you to change it because you don't get to know it. You can't actually look at it, see what's going on, see that it's really a thought and then change it. As long as you're believing that it's this true thing that's dangerous to think, you're never going to be able to actually focus on it, bring your awareness to it, and get that a-ha moment where you see that it's actually just an optional thought.

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So if you're finding it hard to shift a thought and you feel agitated about it, the odds are you don't actually know it's a thought. You think it's a true circumstance or you sort of know it's a thought but you are afraid to have the feelings you would have. You think that that would make it true or that that would be unpleasant.

So you're in thought avoidance, trying to get away from your thought, and it's never going to work. You cannot avoid your thoughts. You have to allow them. You have to allow them to be in your brain, notice them, observe them That's when you'll be able to start shifting them.

It's simple to explain but it is challenging to do, but it's so powerful. And if you have questions about how to apply that or really anything else I teach, you should come to the free webinar that I am hosting. It's August 26th. It's 1:30pm Eastern. And on the webinar, I'm going to teach you the coaching tool that I use with all my private coaching clients. It's a tool you can start using right away. You can even start using it on the call. And I am also going to answer questions about the podcast or what I teach or your self-coaching or whatever else.

So if you want to register, text your email to 347-997-1784. 347-997-1784. Text your email there. If you're on my list, if you already get emails from me, use that email address. Same one, otherwise you're going to get everything twice. So you text your email to that number, 347-997-1784. When you get the prompt for the code word, just text back August and you will be automatically registered and you'll get an email with all the details and information.

If you can't attend live, we will send out a replay so don't worry about that, but I do want you to try to attend live if you can because there's going to be a special bonus, a special little present for folks who attend live. It's just too easy to get a recording and never watch it. It happens to all of us. It goes on the to-do list, we never get around to it. So I really want to reward you to

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kind of train you to show up for yourself live and to learn. No time like the present.

And I know everybody's on different time zones. That's why I do these webinars at different times. Every time I do one I pick a different time of day so that over the course of the year, people in any time zone should get a chance to show up live.

If you are international or you just don't like to text, that's fine. You can register online. Just go to [www.unfuckyourbrain.com/94](http://www.unfuckyourbrain.com/94). That's just this episode number. [Unfuckyourbrain.com/94](http://Unfuckyourbrain.com/94) and there's a link on the podcast notes page to register for the webinar. So you can either text your email to 347-997-1784 and then when you get asked for the code word, you text back August. Or you can go to [unfuckyourbrain.com/94](http://unfuckyourbrain.com/94) and you can use the link on that page to register for the webinar online.

Totally free. You're going to learn something useful. You can ask me questions. They're a super fun time. Darwin may even make a cameo, so come hang out.

If you're loving what you're learning in the podcast, you have got to come check out The Clutch. The Clutch is the podcast community for all things *Unf\*ck Your Brain*. It's where you can get individual help applying the concepts to your own life.

It's where you can learn new coaching tools not shared on the podcast that will blow your mind even more, and it's where you can hang out and connect over all things thought work with other podcast chickens just like you and me. It's my favorite place on earth and it will change your life, I guarantee it. Come join us at [www.unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch](http://www.unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch). It's [unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch](http://unfuckyourbrain.com/theclutch). I can't wait to see you there.

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